

BURNAWAY

Paolo Arao: In Dialog with Drawing at the Columbus Museum

BY [ORION WERTZ](#)

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Paolo Arao, *Aubergine Queen*, 2020; sewn cotton, canvas, nylon, hand woven fibers, corduroy, and denim. Image courtesy of the artist and the Columbus Museum.

Brooklyn-based Filipino American artist Paolo Arao works in fabric, creating brightly colored, formally preoccupied compositions. He selects cloth

remnants and carefully stitches them together into precise geometric arrangements. These arrangements are then stretched over frames, much in the way that canvas is stretched over a frame to create a painting. *Paolo Arao: In Dialog with Drawing* at the Columbus Museum joins thirteen of Arao's personal works with the artist's own selections from the museum's permanent collection. For Arao, the intimate nature of his material is a way to employ formal abstraction without the coldness or distance of minimal work.

Though the process of sewing and assembling is akin to quilting, Arao refers to his works as paintings, which is exactly how they function. In his artist statement he writes, "While my paintings may appear directly related to abstract and geometric drawings, they are also distant cousins of—and equally connected to—portraits and landscapes." Some of the fabrics are acquired from commercial sources in the Philippines, some are his or his husband's recycled clothing, and a few are studio drop cloths. The occasional paint stains on his drop cloth remnants are transformed into expressionist marks through the stitching and stretching process.



Alma Woodsey Thomas, *Untitled*, 1965/1978; watercolor on paper. Image courtesy of the artist and the Columbus Museum.

As an ad hoc curator Arao seems to favor works with wavering, lyrical lines that show the hand of a maker. Next to his painting *Frequent Sees* hangs a

small work in watercolor and pencil by Alma Woodsey Thomas, *Untitled*. This simple piece employs vertical pencil marks and variegated washes of yellow, gray and brown. A work by Charles Ephraim Burchfield, *Daybreak*, is staged beside Arao's *Aubergine Queen*. The Burchfield drawing features a partially clouded sky. The clouds are outlined in pencil, and evenly spaced in such a way that they begin to flatten out into a chaotic pattern. Arao's patterns express order and stability through their carefully maintained rectangles, but there is a sense of chaos or improvisation in the sequential arrangement of rectangular parts. Creases, distress, stains and folds are the human residue in fabric remnants, just as scrawls, washes and buckling paper are human residue in pencil and watercolor.

The thirteen textile paintings in *Paolo Arao: In Dialog with Drawing* would certainly hold up well as a complete exhibition on their own. The process of pairing selections from an archive with these works employs the museum's art collection as a kind of expository tool. Through the artist's choices viewers can speculatively adopt his point of view. Arao chooses to contextualize his works through formal harmonies and the intimacy of hand-made marks on paper.

[Paolo Arao: In Dialog with Drawing](#) is on view at the Columbus Museum through August 8, 2021.